

## **Russian defence plane with 91 aboard crashes in Black Sea; all feared killed**

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**Moscow:** A Russian Defence Ministry plane carrying 91 people onboard today crashed into the Black Sea shortly after taking-off from the resort city of Sochi. There appeared to be no survivors, and those on board included members of Russia's world-famous army choir.

Though the cause of the plane crash wasn't immediately known, some experts gave terror attack as a possible reason – a scenario rejected by Russian officials.

A total of 83 passengers and eight crew members were on the Tu-154 plane when it disappeared from radar two minutes after taking off in good weather. Emergency crews found fragments of the plane about 1.5 kilometers (less than one mile) from shore. By Sunday afternoon, rescue teams had already recovered 10 bodies from the crash site.

The plane belonged to the Defense Ministry and was taking the Alexandrov Ensemble to a New Year's concert at Hemeimeem air base in Syria's coastal province of Latakia.

President Vladimir Putin went on television to declare Monday a nationwide day of mourning.

"We will conduct a thorough investigation into the reasons and will do everything to support the victims' families," Putin said.

More than 3,000 people – including dozens of divers – worked from 27 ships and several helicopters to search the undersea crash site, according to the Defense Ministry. Drones were also flown over to help spot bodies and debris. About 100 more divers were being flown in from naval facilities across Russia, and officials brought in powerful spotlights so the search could continue around the clock.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said 10 bodies had been recovered so far

"No survivors are seen," Konashenkov said.

Magomed Tolboyev, a decorated Russian test pilot, said the circumstances of the crash indicated that all people on board have died.

"There is no chance to survive in such situation," he said, according to the Interfax news agency. "The plane gets instantly blown into pieces."

The Tu-154 is a Soviet-built three-engine airliner designed in the late 1960s. More than 1,000 have been built, and they

have been used extensively by carriers in Russia and worldwide. The plane that crashed was built in 1983, and underwent repairs in 2014, according to the Defense Ministry.

Viktor Ozerov, head of the defense affairs committee in the upper house of the Russian parliament, said the crash could have been caused by a technical malfunction or a crew error. He said he believes it could not have been a terror attack because the plane was operated by the Russian military.

"I totally exclude" the idea of an attack bringing down the plane, he said according to the state-run RIA Novosti news agency.

However, some experts contested Ozerov's claim, saying the crew's failure to report a malfunction pointed at a possible terror attack.

"Possible malfunctions ... certainly wouldn't have prevented the crew from reporting them," Vitaly Andreyev, a former senior Russian air traffic controller, told RIA Novosti, adding that it points at an "external impact."

The passenger list released by the Defense Ministry included 64 members of the Alexandrov Ensemble, including its leader, Valery Khalilov. The ensemble, often referred to as the Red Army choir, is the official choir of the Russian military and also includes a band and a dance company.

The choir sang "Get Lucky" at the opening of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games that Russia hosted in Sochi, becoming an instant online sensation.

"Losing such a great collective all at once is a great tragedy," Moscow city's culture department head Alexander Kibovsky said, according to RIA Novosti.

The military has repeatedly flown groups of Russian singers and artists to perform at Hemeimeem, which serves as the main hub for the Russian air campaign in Syria, which has been operating since September 2015. New Year's is the main holiday for most Russians, and the Orthodox Christmas on Jan. 7 is also widely celebrated.

Also on board was Yelizaveta Glinka, a Russian doctor who has won wide acclaim for her charity work, which has included missions to war zones in eastern Ukraine and Syria. Her foundation said Glinka was accompanying a shipment of medicine for a hospital in Syria.

Putin presented Glinka with an award earlier this month.

"We never feel sure that we will come back alive," she said at the Kremlin award ceremony. "But we are sure that kindness, compassion and charity are stronger than any weapon."

Nine Russian journalists from three Russian television stations were also among the passengers.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev described the crash as a "terrible tragedy." Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu was personally coordinating the rescue efforts.

In recent years, Russian airlines have replaced their Tu-154s with more modern planes, but the military and some other government agencies in Russia have continued to use them. While noisy and fuel-guzzling by modern standards, the plane has been popular with crews that appreciate its maneuverability and ruggedness.

"It's an excellent plane, which has proven its reliability during decades of service," veteran pilot Oleg Smirnov said in

televised remarks.

In April 2010, a Tu-154 carrying Polish President Lech Kaczynski and 95 others crashed while trying to land at a sporadically used military airport in Smolensk in western Russia, killing everyone on board. Investigations by both Polish and Russian experts blamed pilot error in bad weather conditions, but Polish authorities have launched a new probe.

- (With AP inputs)